



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-Baghdad Very Violent Place a Year Ago, PRT Leader Says-

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Baghdad, Iraq - "This was a very violent place a year ago," says Embedded Provincial Team (EPRT) Leader Richard Hawkins as he reflects on his experiences working with Iraqis on capacity-building reconstruction projects in Madain, a Qada or rural district on the eastern outskirts of the capital.

Hawkins, a Foreign Service Officer who arrived in Iraq in early 2008, said insurgent violence was so bad for the first nine months of 2007 "people fled Madain in droves." But, "the Surge turned that around," he added. Residents have returned to the mainly agricultural district and development projects are on track thanks to increased security by Coalition and Iraqi Government Forces.



EPRT Baghdad 8 Team Leader Dick Hawkins listens as date broker recounts harvest problems in recent years.

Personally, said Hawkins, "leading the EPRT and partnering with Iraqis on projects for the past six months has been a terrific thrill. Despite the physical hardships and discomforts like sitting and sweating in an MRAP (Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected armored military vehicle) waiting just to get to the location where you can meet with your Iraqi counterparts, it has been a worthwhile experience. We're doing good things and we're doing them well."

In a recent editorial, Ambassador Charles Ries, former Coordinator for Economic Transition in Iraq at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad commented on the surge. "Those of us stationed in Iraq have been keenly aware for months that the counterinsurgency strategy, popularly known as the "surge," has been very effective. That truth is just now being widely recognized."

He added, "Naturally, the focus has been on military and security actions that have led to dramatic reductions in violence and civil strife. Another angle to the story, however, that has not quite found broad dissemination is the improvement in delivering essential services to the population.

That was a major goal for President Bush in early 2007 when he ordered the formation of the EPRTs to complement the surge in counterinsurgency operations by U.S. Forces that drove terrorists out of Baghdad and Anbar Province. Nine EPRTs are now located in the Baghdad area working on development projects while a further three operate in Anbar.

The State Department-led teams employ military and civilian experts to help build Iraqi capacity in fields like governance, education, civil society, small business development and microfinance lending. The EPRTs joined 17 other PRTs, located in all 18 of Iraq's provinces, in the program that began in November 2005.

Hawkins said, "Right now [August 2008], we've got an enormous responsibility placed on us [Americans]" to help the Iraqis back onto the path of peace and prosperity. To that end, "we've got some of our best and brightest out here working on the PRTs, which is a highly appropriate thing for us to be doing now."

While security has improved dramatically, dangers still exist. On June 24 EPRT members and local government officials holding a meeting in Sadr City were attacked and four Americans were killed, including Steve Farley, a popular member of EPRT 3 operating in Baghdad.

Such obstacles and tragedies, however, have not stopped Hawkins's team, EPRT 8, from meeting huge challenges. "The Qada, or Baghdad rural district, in which we operate, is the size of Rhode Island," he explained. "It's got more than 400,000 residents, a majority of whom derive their income from agriculture.

Water for irrigation is a problem, Hawkins noted. "AQI (al Qaeda in Iraq) blew up a lot of the pump stations and many canals are choked and overgrown with plants." The EPRT is working on clearing the canals and repairing the pump stations with the help of Fahmy Rekani, a U.S. Government irrigation engineer on the team.

Hawkins said, "Agricultural advisers on the Team have been in frequent contact with Mr. Mehdi Al Abid Al Sada, Chairman of the Agriculture Association of Mada'in, on ways to speed up the restoration of irrigation water to the Qada, especially the arid eastern sector."

The Team's advisers have also been working with date farmers to upgrade and increase production of a crop that was once renowned worldwide for its quality.

To help farmers buy needed equipment, supplies and seed, the EPRT has been in contact with local representatives of the Salman Pak Agriculture Bank, a lending institution that is critical to funding farmers in the region.

Tourism is also a potential revenue earner for the Qada, Hawkins said. "Madain, as the district is known, originally means 'the twin cities.' These were ancient cities located on both side of the Tigris River that were capitals of great empires a thousand or more years ago. The remnants are still present and are a strong attraction for tourists. So, the tourism industry can be reconstructed and we're working towards that."

Another project dear to Hawkin's heart involved setting up a computer network in the Qada Council building linked to V/SAT internet service connecting the local Council with the Provincial Council and central government ministries making communications and budget execution faster and more efficient.

He said the project was funded for one year with "the expectation that the Council would find it so essential to its work that it would assume responsibility for continued funding and equipment maintenance. This is now coming to pass."

Overall, Hawkins said, "things look extremely hopeful now." Violence in the Qada has been suppressed and security is allowing Iraqis a breathing space making it possible for agriculture and business to flourish again.

When his tour of duty in Iraq ends in February 2009, Hawkins said he plans to retire from the Foreign Service and join his wife, also a career diplomat, who was recently named by President Bush to be the next U.S. Ambassador to Togo.